

“Stop the Grapes” on the San Francisco Docks 1966

The call came to me in San Francisco, “The grapes are being trucked from Delano to the San Francisco docks. Stop them from being loaded onto the ship.” That was it. That’s all the information they could give me, the rest was up to me.

Because of my contacts with the longshoremen’s union, I was able to confirm that grapes were to be loaded the next morning at San Francisco pier number such-and-such, but the growers had obtained a restraining order prohibiting picketing at the dock, and without a picket line, the longshoremen’s union had no excuse not to load the grapes onto the ship.

But my informant also told me that the picketers had the right to read the injunction before the order could be given by the police to stop picketing and to disperse. A group of us, a dozen or more, showed up early the next morning to set up the picket line, read the injunction, and disperse when ordered to do so.

When we arrived it seemed like a Hollywood stage set: there were eight refrigerated trucks lined up on the dock waiting for the pier to open so they could drop their loads shipside; the dock workers were milling around outside the pier gate waiting to see what was going to happen; the high-priced San Francisco attorney had arrived with dozens of injunctions stuffed into his bulging briefcase; the police were at the ready; and we stood across the street from the pier, next to the railroad tracks. Apparently, someone shouted “camera” and “action,” because the drama began.

One young woman from our group crossed the street holding a picket sign aloft. She walked to the main pier doors and started to walk back and forth in front of the entrance. The attorney served her with the injunction and as she read it word for word, she kept the picket sign high above her head, and when she finished reading the multi-page document, she was given the order to disperse. As she crossed the street to join the other demonstrators, she handed the picket sign to the next person, and the cycle repeated itself many times. For their part, the members of the longshoremen’s union were satisfied that as long as the picket sign was in front of the entrance, their lives might be endangered if they crossed it.

After two hours of this street theater, the grower’s attorney gave up and left. The longshoremen went to work, the idling refrigerated grape trucks remained outside waiting for another day, and we went out for a glorious breakfast.